

World Ag Expo opens

Experts discuss state's water problems on first day of annual event

By Luis Hernandez



[Photo:](#) Ron Holman

[Visalia Times-Delta:](#) TULARE — With resolve to survive daunting economic conditions, agricultural professionals from around the world gathered Tuesday for the first day of the 42nd annual World Ag Expo in Tulare.

"Tough times don't last," Tulare Mayor Craig Vejevoda said during opening ceremonies, "but tough people do."

Most of the 2.6 million square feet of exhibit space was filled with vendors — from as far away as China and Australia — as jets from Lemoore Naval Air Station flew overhead to get the world's largest agricultural trade show off to a rousing start. As many as 1,600 vendors were expected.

Vejevoda was among many state and local government officials at the opening ceremonies. Also

attending was Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, state Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura, Assemblywoman Connie Conway and all five members of the Tulare County Board of Supervisors.

The officials did more than shake hands and wave.

Garamendi led a discussion on state water needs and Kawamura announced a program to fight crop infestations statewide.

Also during the opening ceremonies, a moment of silence was observed in memory of Jennifer McCoun, the Tulare Chamber of Commerce CEO who died during a Jan. 31 skydiving incident.

Water talk

Water was a boiling topic on the first day of the World Ag Expo, as agriculture experts discussed how to deal with a state drought.

Conservation, improvement and construction of state infrastructure and the creation of a new governance body are what's needed to make sure all Californians — not just farmers — receive all the water they need, panelists seemed to agree.

There also seemed to be an agreement that lack of water for farmers will lead to a reduction in crop production and possible dependency on foreign countries for food.

"We don't want to import food," said Garamendi, the state's lieutenant governor who convened a roundtable discussion on the topic.

"It's a do-or-die situation," said Jim Beck, Kern County Water Agency general manager.

"The water table is going down," said John Harris, Harris Farms chairman and CEO.

Beck and Harris were two of the panelists who took part in a Water and Economic Development Roundtable.

"We have to invest in infrastructure that will support 60 [million] to 70 million people," said Steve Patricio, president and CEO of Westside Produce.

Patricio, who also was part of the panel, said the current state infrastructure is outdated and can't support future water demands of a growing population.

Nicole Parra, the state director of regional development, suggested the formation of a governance body that would oversee water.

Water use has pitted farmers against environmental conservation groups, including legal action.

Parra, a former California State Assemblywoman, also suggested holding meetings where

those on opposite sides of the issue can talk about their differences and try to work together.

Panel moderator Tom Nassif agreed with Parra.

"We need to be on the same page," he said.